

Did Hitler have a base in the Antarctic?

□ John Whitfield wonders why fringe fantasies get attracted to the edges of the Earth.

John Whitfield

After the initial flurry of interest, International Polar Year (IPY, launched this March) seems to have gone a bit quiet. I propose peppering things up with a good conspiracy theory.

Handily, a recent paper in *Polar Record*¹ describes one. The Nazis, some believe, established a secret base in Antarctica to which they spirited Hitler at the war's end, fought off British special forces and an American military taskforce, partly by shooting down US planes using flying saucers. The Americans eventually destroyed the base with nuclear weapons in the 1950s. Since then, various governments have striven to conceal this.

In this light, it's no effort to re-imagine Antarctic explorations proposed under the aegis of IPY. A quick tour of the website reveals a project entitled 'Exploring Antarctic Dry Valleys in Preparation for Mars Landings'. It seems scarcely less unlikely that this could really be a mission to recover Nazi treasure or technologies.

Like all good conspiracy theories, this one is built on a skeleton of facts. There was a German expedition to Antarctica in 1938-39. There was classified British military activity in Antarctica during the war. In July 1945, two months after VE Day, the German submarine U-530 appeared at the Argentine naval base of Mar del Plata. The next month, U-977 did the same.

In 1946-47 the US military mounted Operation Highjump, the largest ever Antarctic expedition, consisting of 4,700 men and 13 ships. And in 1958, they carried out three nuclear explosions in the southern hemisphere that were meant to stay secret, but didn't.

Dashed debunking

However, when you see a paper titled "Hitler's Antarctic base: the myth and the reality," you know that reality is going to disappoint. Using documentary evidence and first-hand experience of Antarctica, Colin Summerhayes of the Scott Polar Research Institute in Cambridge, UK, and Toronto-based Peter Beeching puncture every last bit of the story.

To give just a few of their points: the Germans' pre-war visit to Antarctica, concerned mainly with establishing a whaling base, was fleeting, never spending more than a day on the ice shelf. The wartime British force in Antarctica was tiny, and concerned mainly with observation and securing territorial claims to the islands around the Falklands.

The U-boats were in the southern ocean during the Antarctic winter, when the pack ice would have made it impossible for them to reach the coast. The US atomic tests in the 1950s took place around Tristan da Cunha, thousands of kilometres from Antarctica.

It doesn't help that the various conspiracists haven't got their story straight. The proposed location for the Nazi base (often a cavern under the ice) has wandered around over most of the Norwegian Antarctic territory of Dronning Maud Land. And it's not agreed whether the submarines were carrying Hitler himself, or just his ashes.

Taking 21 peer-reviewed pages to address this looks like using a sledgehammer to crack a nut. The story ends up being indulged and damned simultaneously, in the same way that highbrow papers report celebrity goings-on by harrumphing over the lowbrow media's obsession with them (a situation which, I confess, sounds mildly familiar).

And Summerhayes and Beeching face the problem of all scientists trying to engage with unreason. If the people advancing this kind of stuff — one of whom was recently jailed for Holocaust denial — cared about the evidence, they wouldn't be where they are in the first place.

But Summerhayes says that he needed to take a stand. "These theories are incredibly popular among Germans and Russians," he says. "You can either leave it alone, or you can say 'hang on...!'"

Debunking the story was "a lot of fun — I became hooked", he says. "I'm using it as an exercise to educate people about Antarctic science." Or at least to raise the icy continent's press exposure.

Attracted to the fringe

The polar regions are a particularly good spot for a conspiracy theory. Until recently, the people that went there had a habit of not coming back. And when they did, they told stories of unimaginable cold and wind, freezing deserts, strange creatures and mind-boggling hardship. More recently we've witnessed the collapse of thousands of square kilometres of ice shelf and discovered giant underground lakes.

Small wonder that the ice has become a screen on which to project lurid imaginings. If you can imagine Amundsen's expedition eating their



Hitler's Antarctic base: the myth and the reality...

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huskies at 40 below, it's not such a stretch to picture Adolf and Eva chipping ice from the walls of their lair to chill their G 'n' Ts. Lob in some UFOs, and all that's missing for the perfect contemporary myth is a link to 9/11.

Polar myth-making has gone on for centuries. The Greeks and medieval Europeans imagined Thule, a land off the northern edge of the map. Off the top of my head, I can think of Frankenstein pursuing his monster to the Arctic, Superman's Arctic fortress of solitude, and the secret alien Antarctic bases in the X Files movie and Alien vs Predator. There's an evening I'll not get back.

Many of the world's pollutants concentrate in the polar regions, carried there by wind and ocean currents. For some reason something similar seems to happen with our fantasies.

Visit our hitlerhaveabaseinthe.html">newsblog to read and post comments about this story.

References

1. Summerhayes C. & Beeching P. Polar Record , 43 . 1 - 21 (2007).